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Abstract

The prominent literary theorist, Terry Eagleton, is one of a limited number of Marxist theorists to have taken Wittgenstein's ideas seriously. He wrote the script for Derek Jarman's film about Wittgenstein and his work in cultural theory is clearly indebted, to some extent, to Wittgenstein. His *Ideology: an Introduction* employs the Wittgensteinian notions of 'family resemblance' and 'forms of life' and he also leans on Wittgenstein's remarks about epistemological matters in it. Among the novels inspired by Wittgenstein there is one by Eagleton—*Saints and Scholars*—that has a semi-fictionalised version of Wittgenstein meeting in Dublin with James Connolly, Nikolai Bakhtin and Leopold Bloom. Eagleton has clearly both endeavoured to understand Wittgenstein as a person and engaged with Wittgenstein's philosophical work. In this paper I will argue that Eagleton's interpretation of Wittgenstein, in his paper 'Wittgenstein's Friends', is defective in various respects, but I will conclude that the project of uniting the insights of Wittgenstein and Marx is nonetheless a sound one.

Keywords: Terry Eagleton, Wittgenstein, Theory, Marxism, Conceptual elucidation

I. Marx and Wittgenstein

Karl Marx is rightly regarded as one of the most important philosophers of the 19th century.¹ His work encouraged the growth of socialist and communist parties and inspired revolutions in the 20th century. Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* has sold more copies than *50 Shades of Grey*. In fact, the only book to have sold more copies is the Bible.² With capitalism in crisis, trust in mainstream economists is dwindling and a new generation is turning to Marx for answers. David Harvey's lectures on Marx's *Capital* are being viewed by hundreds of thousands of people via the internet and sales of the book itself are up.³ Since Syriza's recent victory in the Greek election, the 'erratic Marxist', and finance minister Yanis Varoufakis has become a regular feature on the news. Historians, political theorists and philosophers who are opposed to Marx's thought cannot afford to ignore it.

Similarly Wittgenstein is regarded by many as the greatest philosopher of the 20th century. Bertrand Russell, writing in 1959, said that '[d]uring the period since 1914 three philosophies have successively dominated the British philosophical world, first that of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, second that of the Logical Positivists, and third that of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*'.⁴ Peter Hacker, commenting on this assessment, suggests that 'Wittgenstein bestrides fifty years of twentieth-century analytic philosophy somewhat as Picasso bestrides

fifty years of twentieth-century painting'.⁵ His work has influenced the course of psychology, sociology, and cultural theory as well as philosophy and it has inspired poetry, novels and film.

However, given the enormous influence of these two thinkers, it is surprising that little has been written about the commonalities in their thought or about the possibility that the two philosophies might be mutually enriching.⁶ It is not that commonalities do not exist. Gavin Kitching, in his introduction to a collection of essays about Marx and Wittgenstein, claims that both Wittgenstein and Marx reject the idea that language 'pictures' reality, oppose the idea that in studying society we study something essentially nonlinguistic, and reject the dualisms of observer–observed and subject–object.⁷ Others have pointed out that Marx and Wittgenstein both evoke natural history,⁸ that they both think that philosophers need to entirely reconceive their task,⁹ and that both philosophers are particularly sensitive to social context.¹⁰ ¹¹

II. The Marxists are Racing Motorists

The recent publication, for the first time, of several of Rush Rhees's notes on conversations with Wittgenstein¹² might prompt a re-evaluation of the relationship between Wittgensteinian and Marxist thought. The notes document some remarks made by Wittgenstein about Marxist philosophy, anarchism and fascism as well as interesting material about psychological notions, the problem of free will and philosophical methodology.

On 8 April 1947, Wittgenstein discussed the relationship between science and philosophy with Rhees. Philosophy, as Wittgenstein conceived it, is a contemplative activity unlike the activities of science. Scientists, absorbed in the activities of science, do not contemplate science in the way that philosophers do and, given that they do not contemplate alternative kinds of investigation, they tend to be dismissive of other, non-causal, kinds of investigation. Rhees reports that Wittgenstein said that, '[f]or the scientist any suggestion of a *Betrachtung* [investigation] which abandons measurement & causality is a backsliding into something more primitive ... and so something to be ashamed of. Or at any rate that science is the fruition of which any other view is an inadequate anticipation (*Vorstufe* [preliminary stage])'.¹³

According to Rhees, Wittgenstein compared scientists with professional racing drivers, who attempt to break speed records. The racing driver is totally preoccupied with breaking speed records and must dedicate their life to the task. They cannot seriously contemplate an alternative take on things that has it that breaking speed records is unimportant and that there could be a world where nobody attempts to break speed records. Rhees reports that Wittgenstein said that, '[t]hat sort of consideration must be foreign to the racing motorist. And the scientist in the same way. (The scientist would regard it as reactionary. So the Marxists would regard it too. For the Marxists are racing motorists.)'¹⁴

It seems clear that this is not a wholly negative appraisal of Marxism. Although Wittgenstein suggests that scientists are blinkered in their work, he does not suggest that people should not engage in scientific activity. So it is not clear from these remarks that Wittgenstein thought that people should not engage in Marxist activity. Dedication to a project is not necessarily a bad thing. There is, however, the implication that Marxists are blinkered, in a similar way to scientists, to alternative kinds of investigation.

This is a somewhat unfair assessment. It is not true that Marxists have failed to recognise a variety of kinds of investigation (and nor is it true that all scientists are blinkered in the way that Wittgenstein suggests). However, this does not mean that there is nothing to this analogy. Marxists have sometimes failed to recognise alternative kinds of investigation and should be wary of assimilating all kinds of explanations of social events and activities to causal or scientific explanations. In this paper I want to examine a particular instance of a somewhat blinkered Marxist take on alternatives, namely Terry Eagleton's take on Wittgensteinian philosophical method.

III. Eagleton

Terry Eagleton wrote the script for the film *Wittgenstein* ¹⁵ and he has clearly both engaged with Wittgenstein's texts and tried to develop an understanding of Wittgenstein as a person. Wittgenstein's influence can be seen in Eagleton's work. In *Ideology: An Introduction*, for example, it can be seen in Eagleton describing 'ideology' as a family resemblance concept, ¹⁶ his use of the notion of a 'form of life', ¹⁷ and in some of his discussions of epistemological matters. ¹⁸ It can also be seen, more explicitly, in the fact that Eagleton makes reference, approvingly, to Wittgenstein's work in the course of making his own arguments in several of his books. ¹⁹

Wittgenstein, as Eagleton acknowledges, is widely regarded to be the greatest philosopher of the 20th century. ²⁰ Given that social theorists and political theorists often engage in philosophical discussions regarding theory, epistemology and mind, it is important that they engage with Wittgenstein's thought and try to come to a correct understanding of it. Eagleton is a prominent social theorist who straddles many disciplines in his work—literary theory, philosophy, sociology, economics and politics. My contention in this paper will be that his interpretation of Wittgenstein is, in some respects, defective, and that he exhibits something like the blindness of the racing motorist.

My focus will be on Eagleton's interpretation of Wittgenstein's later philosophy in his article 'Wittgenstein's Friends', since this is the paper in which Eagleton presents a prolonged discussion of the views of Wittgenstein's later work. ²¹ I will start by outlining Eagleton's take on the question of whether Wittgenstein is conservative or reactionary and will then examine Eagleton's interpretation critically. Along the way I will explain why I think Eagleton's

interpretation is preferable to some other Marxist's interpretations, namely those of Perry Anderson and Alex Callinicos, but I will nonetheless conclude that ultimately Eagleton's interpretation is unsatisfactory in various respects.

IV. Eagleton's Account

Eagleton's Defence of Wittgenstein Against the Charge of Conservatism

Eagleton commences his essay 'Wittgenstein's Friends' by noting similarities between Wittgenstein's writing and the writings of post-structuralists and deconstructionists. Many of those who have been inspired by Wittgenstein 'have lost that distinctively European timbre, that dimension of sheer strangeness and intractability'.²² Eagleton also compares Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* with the Socratic dialogues of Plato: 'The *Investigations* are a voice in dialogue with itself and an implied other, digressing and doubling back, so that the reader is not supplied with a ready-made truth as in the monologism of Russell'.²³ The peculiar numbered paragraphs of the *Philosophical Investigations* incorporate, 'jokes, aphorisms, unanswered questions, parables, exclamations and wonderings aloud'.²⁴ We need not worry ourselves here about just how close Wittgenstein is in style to post-structuralists, deconstructionists or Plato. Eagleton is right to point out that Wittgenstein is stylistically different from many of those who have followed in his footsteps. Wittgenstein's writing *is* unusual and it is important for interpreters of the *Philosophical Investigations* to recognise that it is not simply made up of a series of assertions that Wittgenstein wants to make. Many of the sentences in the *Investigations* are not sentences that Wittgenstein would want to affirm and it takes some thought to decide which amongst them represent Wittgenstein's perspective on things.

It is perhaps due to Eagleton's sensitivity to the fact that the *Investigations* is not intended to present us with a series of 'ready-made truths', that he does not fall into the error of accusing Wittgenstein of conservatism by looking at his remarks in isolation and taking them at face value. Marxist philosophers, with their interest in radical change, are naturally drawn to Wittgenstein's proclamation that '[p]hilosophy ... leaves everything as it is'.²⁵ Several philosophers and political theorists have taken this as a clear demonstration of Wittgenstein's conservatism.²⁶ However, given that Wittgenstein's later writings often involve discussion with an interlocutor and given that his writings do not just consist of assertions we should, at the very least, look at the context of the remark and think about (a) whether Wittgenstein wants to assert that philosophy leaves everything as it is and (b) what attitude Wittgenstein is taking up to this claim. Does he, for example, think that it is regrettable that philosophy leaves everything as it is?

Eagleton takes it that Wittgenstein does want to affirm the claim but, unlike Anderson and Callinicos, Eagleton does not take this to demonstrate that Wittgenstein was conservative. Eagleton's take on what Wittgenstein says in §124 is that Wittgenstein thinks it is regrettable that philosophy leaves everything as it is and that is why Wittgenstein recommended that his acolytes abandon philosophy. Wittgenstein's attitude towards philosophy in this passage is 'not after all very different from that of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach',²⁷ Eagleton says. It is open to both Marx and Wittgenstein to want radical change despite their somewhat dismissive attitudes towards the philosophy that has gone before them. A desire for radical change is also consistent with low hopes for philosophy in the future.

Yet there is another passage in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* that has fed the charge that Wittgenstein is a conservative philosopher. In §226 Wittgenstein says that, 'what has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—forms of life'.²⁸ This can be interpreted as conservative for more than one reason. First of all, it might be taken to mean that we have to accept the ways of living and the institutions that we are presented with and secondly Wittgenstein could be accused of making forms of life other than one's own immune from criticism by suggesting that those engaged in other forms of life operate with different concepts and so any attempt to criticise another form of life will inevitably just end up talking past the target of the criticism.²⁹

Eagleton takes on the first of the criticisms by arguing that 'there is no reason why what has to be accepted are *these particular* forms of life, and ... little reason to believe that Wittgenstein himself was in the least content with his own society'.³⁰ So Wittgenstein is not giving expression to conservatism here. In fact, one might argue, as Eagleton suggests, that '[i]f deep-seated conceptual change is to be possible it can only be the result of transformations in forms of life'.³¹ If this was Wittgenstein's position then he could be rescued from the charge of conservatism by saying that, although he thought philosophy leaves everything as it is, he nonetheless thought that change was possible and it is open to him to think that change is desirable. Change would not come through philosophy but through dramatically transforming forms of life. In fact Wittgenstein said something like this himself when he said that '[t]he sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings, and it was possible for the sickness of problems to get cured only through a changed mode of thought and life, not through a medicine invented by an individual'.³²

Additionally, there is evidence from the recently published conversations with Rush Rhees that Wittgenstein thought that changes in people's ideas might come through changes in society. According to Rhees Wittgenstein was dismissive of the idea that fascism could be combatted by combatting loose thinking, 'as though you could *persuade* people to be logical in their thinking'.³³ Wittgenstein apparently regularly spoke to Rhees about how he thought that anti-semitism

had disappeared as a result of a 'change in the form of society' in Russia. Rhees opines that, 'I think he believed that the central place of manual labour and the vanishing of the prestige which money gives [with us] was one main factor in this'.³⁴

Eagleton defends Wittgenstein against accusations of conservatism from yet another angle by pointing to Wittgenstein's personal relationships with various left-wing thinkers (the *friends* from the title of his essay). This, of course, is no proof that Wittgenstein was left wing himself, but it does take the sting out of criticisms of Wittgenstein that try to paint him as conservative by citing his historical circumstances and relationships. Amongst Wittgenstein's friends were people like Nikolai Bakhtin, a classics lecturer at Birmingham University, described by Fania Pascal as a 'fiery communist';³⁵ George Thomson, another Marxist classics lecturer at Birmingham who had a role in shifting Bakhtin's politics to the left; and Pierro Sraffa, an economist who was friends with the Marxist Antonio Gramsci and whom Wittgenstein credits as being the stimulus for 'the most fruitful ideas' of the *Philosophical Investigations*.³⁶

We also know, from accounts given by these friends of Wittgenstein, that he personally expressed some sympathy for left-wing stances. As Eagleton notes, George Thomson claimed that Wittgenstein 'was opposed to [Marxism] in theory, but supported it to a large extent in practice'.³⁷ In his biography of Wittgenstein Ray Monk adds that '[t]his chimes with a remark Wittgenstein once made to Rowland Hutt ... "I am a communist, *at heart*". Monk also draws on Thomson's account to demonstrate that in the 1930s Wittgenstein was keen on the idea of full employment and alert to the dangers of fascism. He concludes that, '[t]here is no doubt that during the political upheavals of the mid-1930s Wittgenstein's sympathies were with the working class and the unemployed, and that his allegiance, broadly speaking, was with the Left'.³⁸

Eagleton's Criticism of Wittgenstein

Despite building up a defence of Wittgenstein against the charge of conservatism from several angles, Eagleton ultimately argues that Wittgenstein is 'reactionary' and argues that Marxist theories have certain advantages over Wittgenstein's take on language and philosophy.³⁹ This, I think, mirrors the scientist's idea that forms of investigation that do not involve measurement and reference to causality are 'primitive' in Wittgenstein's example of the scientists and the racing motorists. Eagleton thinks of Wittgensteinian 'explanation' as in competition with Marxist explanation and thinks that it comes off the worst for it.

Although Eagleton does not fall into the traps of attributing a conservative ideology to Wittgenstein on the basis of §124 and §226 (discussed in II(i)), he does say that there is something to the idea that §124 ('philosophy ... leaves everything as it is') is 'an index of social and intellectual reaction, a complacent consecration of existing "language games"'.⁴⁰ Later

Eagleton claims that '[t]he criticism that Wittgenstein consecrates the linguistic status quo' is 'accurate in one sense'.⁴¹ Exactly in what sense Wittgenstein consecrates the linguistic status quo is left unclear but Eagleton ultimately argues that Wittgenstein is 'reactionary' because, unlike Marxists, he does not recognise that metaphysics is at home in the everyday.⁴² Wittgenstein suggests that metaphysical problems can be dissolved by 'bring[ing] words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use', which Eagleton interprets as 'referring of beliefs and discourses to social activity'.⁴³ However, Eagleton thinks that Wittgenstein is mistaken if he thinks that 'such referring constitutes a liberation from the metaphysical'.⁴⁴

Why does Eagleton doubt that Wittgenstein's method can liberate us from metaphysics? In discussing one of the metaphysical 'pictures' of the *Tractatus*, the idea of the 'crystalline purity of logic', Wittgenstein compares the picture with a pair of glasses distorting our vision. What we need to do, according to Wittgenstein, is to take the glasses off.⁴⁵ We need to return to the 'rough ground' of ordinary language to dissolve metaphysical problems.⁴⁶ Yet Eagleton detects a tension here in Wittgenstein's thought. On the one hand Wittgenstein wants us to look to everyday uses of words to dissolve metaphysical problems but on the other he wants to say that metaphysical mystification arises out of ordinary language, 'out of the very structures of our grammar'.⁴⁷ However, if the problems are problems in ordinary language, then how can returning to language help to solve the problems? If the 'glasses' belong to ordinary language then how can we take them off? Eagleton concludes that, despite having some insight into philosophical questions, Wittgenstein's "'popular" language remains largely metaphysical'.⁴⁸

In order to get past this stumbling block, Eagleton thinks that Wittgenstein can learn from Marxists. If metaphysics is at home in everyday language then what is needed is a transformation of the everyday. Marx was right to claim that 'the point is to change [the world]'. Eagleton also thinks that Wittgenstein could learn from Marxists that metaphysical problems are not always rooted in language. According to Eagleton, '[f]or Wittgenstein, metaphysical mystifications seem to arise for purely linguistic reasons—from 'a tendency to sublime the logic of our language'.⁴⁹

Eagleton provides an example of where he thinks Wittgenstein's appeal to ordinary language runs into trouble in §120 of the *Philosophical Investigations*:

You say: the point isn't the word but its meaning and you think of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word. Here the word, there the meaning. The money, and the cow one can buy with it. But contrast: money and its use.⁵⁰

Here Eagleton thinks that Wittgenstein escapes from one philosophical problem (conceiving the meanings of words as entities) but runs into another (thinking that the value of money derives from its uses). Yet it is not obvious that Wittgenstein does do this. As a Marxist, presumably

Eagleton's point is that the value of money is to be thought about in terms of it being a commodity. Eagleton emphasises money's role in extinguishing differences. Money is the 'universal equivalent' that extinguishes qualitative differences between commodities. However, according to Eagleton, Wittgenstein makes the mistake of stressing the various things you can do with money and so obscures this role. Wittgenstein makes the mistake of 'trusting to money as *difference*'.⁵¹

V. Problems with Eagleton's Account

Wittgenstein and Money

Eagleton criticises Wittgenstein for entangling himself in metaphysical mysteries by suggesting that the value of money derives from its uses. However, nothing that Wittgenstein says in §120 (see above) implies or even more loosely suggests that this is Wittgenstein's position. One can hold that (a) the meanings of words are not entities, (b) that it is useful to think about meaning in terms of the use of a word,⁵² (c) that money can be used to buy many things, and (d) that the value of money derives from something other than its uses perfectly consistently.

Wittgenstein is not getting entangled in any kind of metaphysical mystery at all here. It would be peculiar for Marxists to deny that money can be used to buy cows and a great many other things, as there is nothing nonsensical or 'metaphysical' about this claim. It is true that Wittgenstein emphasises the uses of money in §120 rather than examining the question of the value of money from a Marxist perspective, but it is worth remembering that the point of §120 is not to say something revealing about money but to make a point about the meanings of words. Right at the beginning of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein launches an attack on the 'Augustinian' theory of language, which includes the idea that, '[e]very word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands'.⁵³

Wittgenstein's association of meaning with use in §120 can be viewed as a response to the Augustinian theory. It certainly provides an alternative way of viewing meaning and one that coheres with our ordinary way of talking and thinking about meaning. Yet to what end? The immediate context of the remark is a series of remarks about the nature of philosophy. The remark about philosophy leaving everything as it is (§124) appears on the next page. Also close by is another remark that Eagleton thought was problematic, namely §116, which includes the sentence: 'What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.' A proper understanding of these remarks and the other remarks about philosophy show that Eagleton's understanding of Wittgenstein is problematic.

Language and Metaphysics

Immediately before the remark about bringing words back to their everyday use (§116), Wittgenstein says '[w]hen philosophers use a word—"knowledge", "being", "object", "I",

“proposition/sentence”, “name”—and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home? ⁵⁴ Now, given that in §43 of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein had suggested that ‘meaning’ and ‘use’ are employed in the same way in a large class of cases, it seems clear that Wittgenstein is here (in §116) making a point about the meanings of words like ‘knowledge’ and ‘object’. These are words that philosophers very often concern themselves with, in epistemology and metaphysics respectively, and they are words that philosophers are keen to get clear about the meaning of because in order to solve or dissolve philosophical problems about them we must first be clear about what the words mean. Wittgenstein’s suggestion is that we will not get clear about the meaning of words by always assuming that we must find some kind of common *essential* feature of the things referred to by the word. If we want to get clear about the meaning of ‘knowledge’ and ‘object’ we should look at how the words are actually used (when used correctly) and it may be that they are not used to refer to a set of things with a common feature. So what Wittgenstein is doing in §116 is suggesting a way of going about doing philosophy.

One thing to notice about this point is that the words Wittgenstein is talking about are commonly used ordinary words, for the most part. People very often use the word ‘I’, they often talk about what they know and what they do not know and they often use and talk about names. This shows that, contra Eagleton, Wittgenstein *did* recognise that metaphysics has a home in the everyday (or at least that everyday words often crop up in philosophical problems). ⁵⁵ This is something that Eagleton himself must acknowledge in order to criticise Wittgenstein for suggesting that returning to everyday use to dissolve metaphysical problems conflicts with his claim that metaphysical problems arise out of ordinary language (I will return to this criticism in the next section).

A second thing to notice about this point is that it helps to contextualise Wittgenstein’s remark about the use of money in §120. The context of that remark helps us to see that it is not only a response to the Augustinian theory, but also a remark about how to go about dealing with philosophical problems. Philosophers have been vexed for centuries trying to understand words like ‘knowledge’ and ‘mind’ in terms of their essential features or in terms of some kind of entity corresponding to them. What we can do to overcome that vexation is to approach the problems differently. If we want to get clear about what ‘knowledge’ means or about what ‘mind’ means, we should think about how those terms are ordinarily and correctly used. Wittgenstein can be seen as recommending that, instead of looking for an entity corresponding to words like ‘mind’, we should look at ‘what can be done with’ ⁵⁶ words like ‘mind’.

Before moving on to look at Eagleton’s suggestion that there is a tension in Wittgenstein’s thought regarding the everyday, it is worth quickly setting aside Eagleton’s claim that

Wittgenstein mistakenly thought that all metaphysical muddles have their source in language. This can be easily disposed of by looking at some of the remarks that Wittgenstein made about the sources of philosophical error. In the *Blue Book* we find that Wittgenstein says that ‘our preoccupation with the method of science’ results in philosophical errors. ‘Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way that science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness’.⁵⁷ In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein suggests that trying to treat logic like a natural science leads to problems (§81, §89), that treating philosophical questions about time as scientific questions leads to error (§89), that philosophical questions more generally are not like scientific ones (§109).

The ‘Glasses’ Metaphor

What about the supposed tension between the claim that philosophical problems originate in ordinary language and the claim that we should ‘take off the glasses’ and ‘return to the rough ground’? Recall that Eagleton criticised Wittgenstein for claiming on the one hand that (a) philosophical problems can be dissolved by looking carefully at our ordinary ways of using (often ordinary) words but on the other hand claiming that (b) metaphysical problems arise out of ordinary language. It seems that we cannot solve problems by looking at ordinary language if the problems originate in features of our ordinary language. Did Wittgenstein really hold both of these positions? If so, then is the tension really as problematic as Eagleton claims?

We’ve already seen in §116 that Wittgenstein wants to claim that we should ‘bring words back from their metaphysical to their ordinary use’ in order to deal with philosophical problems. So it seems clear enough that he is committed to the view that we can dissolve philosophical problems by looking carefully at our ordinary use of words like ‘knowledge’ and ‘being’. In §111 Wittgenstein says that the ‘disquietudes’ of philosophy ‘are as deeply rooted in us as the forms of our language’ and then in §112 Wittgenstein says that ‘[a] simile that has been absorbed into the forms of our language produces a false appearance which disquiets us’. Furthermore, elsewhere in his later work (in what has now been published as the *Big Typescript*) Wittgenstein explained why it is that philosophical questions had continued to perplex us since the time of Plato:

The reason is that our language has remained the same and always introduces us to the same questions. As long as there is a verb ‘to be’ which seems to work like ‘to eat’ and ‘to drink’; as long as there are adjectives like ‘identical’, ‘true’, ‘false’, ‘possible’; as long as people speak of the passage of time and of the extent of space, and so on; as long as this happens people will always run up against the same teasing difficulties and will stare at something which no explanation seems to remove.⁵⁸

So it seems clear that Eagleton is correct that there is at least the appearance of tension here. Philosophical problems are solved in ordinary language but also originate there. Does this mean that metaphysics cannot be abolished using Wittgenstein's methodologies as Eagleton claims? Is transforming our practical life the only possible solution as some Marxists have claimed?

Abolishing Metaphysics

One point that could be made in response to Eagleton's criticism is that it is perfectly possible for one thing to contain both puzzles *and* their solutions and for it to leave us satisfied with having solved the problems. There are books that contain both puzzles (e.g. crossword puzzles or riddles) and their solutions and we can work our way through the puzzles to our satisfaction and check our answers against the solutions given in the back of the book. These books might leave us puzzled but they need not. We might then wonder whether the philosophical problems that misleading features of our language tempt us into are analogous to the puzzles in a puzzle book. There are certainly ways in which philosophical problems are different. The problems found in a puzzle book are formulated in sentences that make sense. However, according to Wittgenstein philosophical problems 'arise when language is, as it were, idling, not when it is doing work'.⁵⁹ In §38 of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein makes the same sort of point when he says that these problems arise 'when language goes on holiday'.⁶⁰ When we twist a concept out of shape so that it is not being put to work any more, it is not being used in a way such that what we are saying makes sense (it is not being used at all). When philosophers are vexed by metaphysical problems they have been tempted into saying things that do not make sense. Moreover, as Wittgenstein said in the passage cited from the *Big Typescript* above, philosophical problems tend to reoccur because the misleading features of language remain.

However, despite the fact that language continues to contain misleading features, Wittgenstein has some confidence that philosophical problems can be overcome. In the collection of remarks that have been published as *Culture and Value*, we find that Wittgenstein said that, although '[l]anguage sets everyone the same traps; it is an immense network of easily accessible wrong turnings', this does not mean that we have to keep on falling into the traps. We might be tempted to speak nonsense, but we are not compelled to. Wittgenstein's task, as he saw it, was to 'erect signposts at all the junctions where there are wrong turnings so as to help people past the danger points'.⁶¹ What this means is that, in order to dissolve philosophical problems, we must remind people of how the concepts that are misused⁶² in philosophical problems are in fact correctly used. These 'reminders' are the signposts that help us to get past the 'danger points'. This suggests that Eagleton is mistaken to criticise Wittgenstein for seeing ordinary language as both a source of problems and the solution to problems. There is no inconsistency in saying that philosophical or metaphysical problems arise when we get confused about the

use of ordinary concepts and that the solution is to return to ordinary language (i.e. to look carefully at how the concepts are used correctly).⁶³

Eagleton himself gives an example of where Wittgenstein spots a wrong turning and helpfully erects signposts. Commenting on §246 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Eagleton says, 'I cannot say, "I can know that I am in pain but can only guess that you are," since as Wittgenstein comments the sentence "I know that I am in pain" is meaningless. I can be as certain of someone else's sensations in certain circumstances as I am of any fact.' What is the 'wrong turning' that has been taken here and what are Wittgenstein's 'signposts'? It is a mistake (a wrong turning) to think that in saying 'I know that I am in pain' I am saying something just like 'I know that I am in Europe' (said while in Istanbul). We are misled into thinking that we know when we are in pain by the fact that ignorance is excluded, as is doubt. If I cannot doubt that I am in pain and I am not ignorant of the fact then surely I *know* that I am in pain when I am in pain. Yet in this case ignorance is logically or grammatically excluded. There is *no such thing* as being in pain but being ignorant of it. The sentence, 'I am in pain but I doubt that I am' does not make *sense*. One of Wittgenstein's 'signposts' here, his reminder of correct ordinary use of the term 'pain' is his point that 'it makes sense to say about other people that they doubt whether I am in pain; but not to say it about myself'. If doubt and ignorance are *logically* excluded, then so is knowledge. The claim that 'I know that I am in Europe', unlike 'I know that I am in pain', is a genuine case of knowledge because it is possible for me to doubt that I am in Europe (when I am in Istanbul and unsure of where the continental border lies) and I can resolve my doubt by, for example, consulting a map.⁶⁴

How Should we Interpret §124?

Given what has been said above about Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, we can return to Wittgenstein's claim that '[p]hilosophy ... leaves everything as it is' (PI, §124) and see it in a new light that reveals a problem with Eagleton's interpretation of it. Eagleton compares Wittgenstein's claim with Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, where Marx says '[t]he philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it'.⁶⁵ What is it that Marx and Wittgenstein thinks changes (or remains unchanged)? In Marx's case he wants to criticise the philosophy that has gone before him for merely interpreting *the world* and not changing it (*the world*). Marx is urging us to take action to change our surroundings rather than just sitting in an ivory tower writing and thinking about them. However, Wittgenstein's complaint about past philosophers is not that they have misinterpreted *the world* but that they have failed to use concepts correctly and so have ended up confused. His proposed solution is to remind us of the correct use of the concepts that are causing confusion. I suggest that, when Wittgenstein says that philosophy leaves *everything* as it is, that he means that it leaves everything *in its domain* as it is, namely the concepts that philosophers are confused about. His

point is not that concepts should be preserved as they are, as Perry Anderson has argued,⁶⁶ but that it is not philosophy's job to alter concepts in a way that seems to suit philosophers' inclinations (and thus end up speaking nonsense).

What this means is that Eagleton's interpretation of §124 is off the mark. Eagleton is wrong to think that, in order for Wittgenstein to be absolved of the charge of conservatism, he must think it is regrettable that philosophy leaves everything as it is.⁶⁷ What Eagleton gets right is that Wittgenstein really did want to assert that philosophy leaves everything as it is. Yet this is not a conservative position. It is not asserting either that concepts should not be subject to radical change or that the world should not be subject to radical change. What Wittgenstein is saying in §124 is that philosophers should not alter concepts in such a way that they are no longer doing work—such that they are idling or on holiday—because doing this is a wrong turn off in the direction of nonsense.

Transforming Everyday Life

Finally I want to consider Eagleton's claim that action to transform our practical or everyday life is the way to abolish metaphysics. Given that Wittgenstein did not think that all philosophical problems were rooted in language and that some of them were rooted in forms of life or cultural factors, it is fair to say that Wittgenstein thought that some philosophical problems could be dissolved by transforming our practical life as Eagleton suggests. The passage from Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* cited above ('[t]he sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings') is evidence that this was Wittgenstein's attitude.⁶⁸ However, since it is always possible that concepts like 'knowledge', 'being', 'I' will be misused in such a way that they are 'idling' metaphysical or philosophical problems can never be shown the door for good. Eagleton may well be right in thinking that dramatic changes in economic and political life would make certain metaphysical views (or 'wrong turnings') less tempting, but he has not demonstrated that Marxist philosophy offers a superior way of abolishing metaphysics and it is at best unclear that this could ever be done. Perhaps a better way of thinking about metaphysics would be to think of Marxist and Wittgensteinian philosophies as complementary. Both offer alternative ways of thinking about and dealing with metaphysical problems that are not obviously in conflict always and everywhere. Some philosophical problems might pass away as circumstances are transformed and some might be dissolved by putting up signposts to warn against tempting wrong turnings. Marxists must not be racing motorists!⁶⁹

Notes

¹ For example, Victor Ferkiss, in his book *Nature, Technology and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 1993) says that '[w]ithout question, the most important political thinker in the

modern world has been Karl Marx (1818–1883)' (p. 105) and Allen W. Wood describes Marx as 'one of the nineteenth century's greatest philosophers' (in *Karl Marx—Arguments of the Philosophers*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2004), p. xi).

² Jeffries, S. 'Why Marxism is on the Rise Again', *The Guardian*, 4 July 2012.

³ Jeffries, S. 'Why Marxism is on the Rise Again', *The Guardian*, 4 July 2012.

⁴ B. Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 216.

⁵ P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 1.

⁶ There are a few notable exceptions: A.R. Manser, in his inaugural lecture at Southampton University compared Wittgenstein and Marx and concluded that there are similarities in terms of Marx and Wittgenstein's relationships to the philosophers that have gone before them. Wittgenstein and Marx are both 'end of philosophy' philosophers (published as A.R. Manser, *The End of Philosophy: Marx and Wittgenstein* (Southampton: Camelot Press, 1973)). Other books on the topic include Susan Easton's *Humanist Marxism and Wittgensteinian social philosophy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983); David Rubinstein's *Marx and Wittgenstein: Social Praxis and Social Explanation* (Routledge: London, 1981), and a collection of essays edited by Gavin Kitching and Nigel Pleasants—*Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2002). Pedro Karczmarczyk (2013) has also recently suggested that there are similarities between Wittgenstein's thought and Althusser's claims about ideology (in 'Althusser and Wittgenstein: Ideology and Therapeutic Analysis of Language', *Rethinking Marxism*, 25:4, pp. 534–548).

⁷ Kitching, in Kitching and Pleasants, op. cit., p. 3.

⁸ T. Schatski, 'Marx and Wittgenstein: Natural Historians' in Kitching and Pleasants, op. cit., pp. 49–62.

⁹ See, for example, Manser, op. cit.

¹⁰ See, for example, Rubinstein, op. cit., and R. Vinten (2013), 'Leave Everything As It Is: A Critique of Marxist Interpretations of Wittgenstein', *Critique*, 41:1, pp. 21–22.

¹¹ T.P. Uschanov has argued that one reason why Marxist philosophers and social theorists more generally have ignored or misrepresented Wittgenstein's views is the influence of Ernest Gellner's book, *Words and Things*, which may well be true. See, 'Ernest Gellner's Criticisms of Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy' in in Kitching and Pleasants, op. cit., pp. 23–46.

¹² R. Rhees, L. Wittgenstein and G. Citron (eds), 'Wittgenstein's Philosophical Conversations with Rush Rhees (1939–50): From the Notes of Rush Rhees', *Mind*, 124:493 (January 2015).

¹³ R. Rhees, L. Wittgenstein and G. Citron (eds), 'Wittgenstein's Philosophical Conversations with Rush Rhees (1939–50): From the Notes of Rush Rhees', *Mind*, 124:493 (January 2015), p. 38.

¹⁴ R. Rhees, L. Wittgenstein and G. Citron (eds), 'Wittgenstein's Philosophical Conversations with Rush Rhees (1939–50): From the Notes of Rush Rhees', *Mind*, 124:493 (January 2015).

¹⁵ *Wittgenstein* [Film] Directed by Derek Jarman. Japan/UK: BFI Production/Bandung Productions/Channel Four Films/Uplink Co., 1993. Eagleton's script for the film was published in the same year: T. Eagleton, *Wittgenstein: The Terry Eagleton Script, The Derek Jarman Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1993). For a critical take on Jarman's film and Eagleton's script see Colin McGinn's article 'Soul on Fire', *New Republic*, 20 June 1994, volume 210, issue 25, pp. 34–39.

¹⁶ T. Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction (New and Updated Edition)* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 193.

¹⁷ T. Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction (New and Updated Edition)* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 27–29, 51, 171.

¹⁸ The following passage, from *Ideology: An Introduction*, is reminiscent of Wittgenstein's distinction between a mistake and a mental disturbance (see *On Certainty* §§67–75, and §647) 'There is a difference between being mistaken and being deluded: if someone lifts a cucumber and announces his telephone number we may conclude that he has made a mistake, whereas if he spends long evenings chatting vivaciously into a cucumber we might have to draw different conclusions' (Eagleton, *Ideology*, op. cit., pp. 26–27).

¹⁹ See, for example, The following passage, from *Ideology: An Introduction*, is reminiscent of Wittgenstein's distinction between a mistake and a mental disturbance (see *On Certainty* §§67–75, and §647) 'There is a difference between being mistaken and being deluded: if someone lifts a cucumber and announces his telephone number we may conclude that he has made a mistake, whereas if he spends long evenings chatting vivaciously into a cucumber we might have to draw different conclusions' (Eagleton, *Ideology*, pp. 88, p. 168, p. 193; T. Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 3–7, 47, 50–51, 77, 78, 93–94 (first published in 2007); T. Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 144; T. Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 53, 80, 124, 130.

²⁰ Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life*, op. cit., p. 5.

²¹ T. Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', *New Left Review*, 135 (September–October 1982), republished in T. Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1986), pp. 99–130.

²² T. Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', *New Left Review*, 135 (September–October 1982), republished in T. Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 9.

²³ T. Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', *New Left Review*, 135 (September–October 1982), republished in T. Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 118.

²⁴ T. Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', *New Left Review*, 135 (September–October 1982), republished in T. Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 118.

²⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), §124.

²⁶ Perhaps most famously J.C. Nyiri has argued in a series of articles that the tone and content of Wittgenstein's writings as well as Wittgenstein's historical circumstances lend support to the view that there are 'family resemblances' between Wittgenstein and conservative philosophers. See, for example, 'Wittgenstein's Later Work in Relation to Conservatism' in B. McGuiness (ed.) *Wittgenstein and His Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), p. 44. Others arguing for this view of Wittgenstein include Perry Anderson, Alex Callinicos, Ernest Gellner and H.C. McCauley.

²⁷ Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', op. cit., p. 100.

²⁸ Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', op. cit., p. 100.

²⁹ Nyiri makes this argument in 'Wittgenstein's Later Work in Relation to Conservatism' (p. 58), as does Ernest Gellner in *Reason and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 120 and David Bloor in *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 161. I will not respond to this criticism here. My aim in this paper is to engage with Eagleton's arguments in particular.

³⁰ Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', op. cit., p. 107.

³¹ Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', op. cit., p. 100.

³² L. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Oxford: Blackwell, revised edition, 1978), part II, §23.

³³ Rhees et al., op. cit., p. 58.

³⁴ Rhees et al., op. cit., p. 59 (the words in square brackets are unclear in Rhees's notes).

³⁵ F. Pascal, 'A Personal Memoir' in Rush Rhees (ed.) *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, revised edition), p. 14.

³⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit., p. 4.

³⁷ Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', op. cit., p. 194, n. 70 (the claim from Thomson originally appeared in G. Thomson, 'Wittgenstein: Some Personal Recollections', *The Revolutionary World*, vols 37–39 (Amsterdam: Gruener, 1979)).

³⁸ R. Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Random House, 1990), p. 343.

³⁹ In his book *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, Edward Kanterian argues that 'to claim, as Terry Eagleton has done, that Wittgenstein's ideas were somehow related to the Marxist aesthetics of Mikhail Bakhtin via this broad affinity with brother Nikolai is to overlook subtle and not so subtle differences between Wittgenstein and Marxist thought', p. 160. While I agree with Kanterian that there are significant differences between Wittgensteinian and Marxist philosophy, my aim here will be to demonstrate that the two philosophies are not so incompatible as Eagleton thinks.

⁴⁰ Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', op. cit., p. 100.

⁴¹ Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', op. cit., p. 104.

⁴² Eagleton makes a similar criticism in his book *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 153: 'Benjamin's case is as complex as that of another Jewish philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who similarly returns language to social practice at the same time as too complacently endorsing existing practices'.

⁴³ Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', op. cit., p. 107.

⁴⁴ Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', op. cit., p. 107.

⁴⁵ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit., §103.

⁴⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §107.

⁴⁷ Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', op. cit., p. 108.

⁴⁸ Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', op. cit., p. 111.

⁴⁹ Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', op. cit., p. 107.

⁵⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit., §120.

⁵¹ Eagleton, 'Wittgenstein's Friends', op. cit., p. 122.

⁵² To be clear, Wittgenstein does not *identify* meaning and use. He famously said that '[f]or a large class of cases of the employment of the word "meaning"—though not for all—this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.' *Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit., §43.

⁵³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit., §1.

⁵⁴ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit.

⁵⁵ Andrew Lugg makes a similar criticism of Eagleton's interpretation of Wittgenstein in his 'Was Wittgenstein A Conservative Thinker?', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, XXIII:4 (1985)) where he argues '[t]his [Eagleton's] criticism ... labours under the difficulty that Wittgenstein does not afford "the everyday" the privileged position that he is thought to afford it. He does not think that common sense provides us with an alternative, more adequate theory of how things are, only that the poverty of philosophical ideas concerning human thought and behaviour can be exposed by examining how we actually think and behave' (p. 469). Lugg is correct, I think, in saying that Wittgenstein does not just counterpose common sense to philosophical metaphysics, but his account of what Wittgenstein actually does is slightly different from mine here (Lugg suggests that what Wittgenstein does is to 'adduce facts about our mental life' and to 'confront theory with practice, what we think people do with what they actually do' (p. 469)).

⁵⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit., §120.

⁵⁷ L. Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 18. Andrew Lugg also takes Eagleton to task on this point drawing on the same part of the Blue Book in his 'Wittgenstein and Politics: Not Right, Left or Center' (in *International Studies in Philosophy*, XXXVI/1 (2004), pp. 61–79): 'Wittgenstein ... frequently reminds us that we are apt to accept views that are wrong, misguided or incoherent for other than "purely linguistic reasons". It is not for nothing that he deplores our "craving for generality" and notes that we frequently embrace explanations for their "charm"', p. 67.

⁵⁸ Wittgenstein, L. *Big Typescript: TS 213*, transl. C. Grant Luckhardt and Maximilian E. Aue (Chichester: Wiley–Blackwell, 2005), BT 424.

⁵⁹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit., §132.

⁶⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit., §38.

⁶¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), §18.

⁶² Misused or not used at all—'idling'/'on holiday'.

⁶³ My response to Eagleton here is slightly different to the one that Andrew Lugg makes in his 'Was Wittgenstein A Conservative Thinker?' I want to suggest that we can remove the metaphorical glasses, as Wittgenstein suggests, whereas Lugg says that '[i]t may be true that one can only survey human practices as though through a pair of spectacles, but to say that such practices can never be surveyed without distortion is like saying that spectacles can never

improve sight. As I understand Wittgenstein, his view is not that descriptions of practices can be given in a “theory neutral” manner but only that there is a distinction to be drawn between ideological and nonideological descriptions’ (pp. 469–470)—which suggests that Lugg thinks that the glasses cannot be removed but that they can be adjusted so as not to distort what is seen through them. It could be that there is no disagreement here, depending on whether the glasses are taken to be language in its entirety or a distorting ideal.

⁶⁴ Wittgenstein puts up another signpost in §246 when he points out that ‘I cannot be said to learn of [my sensations]. I have them.’ And, as Peter Hacker points out ‘[i]t makes sense to talk of knowing where it also makes sense to talk of finding out, coming to know, or learning’ (in *Wittgenstein* (London: Phoenix, 1997), p. 28).

⁶⁵ K. Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, Thesis 11, 1845, in Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, 2nd edition, edited and introduced by C.J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974).

⁶⁶ See Vinten, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–18.

⁶⁷ This leaves open the possibility that Wittgenstein nonetheless thought that it is shame that *the world* is the way that it is.

⁶⁸ There is also this from Rush Rhees’s notes: ‘Wittgenstein’s frequent mentions of the way anti-Semitism had disappeared in Russia by a change in the form of society. I think he believed that the central place of manual labour and the vanishing of the prestige that money gives with us, was one main factor in this. I remember that when I told him there was considerable or growing anti-semitism among the blacks in New York and some other cities, he was astonished and did not really believe it; it was just the sort of thing that was unnatural and couldn’t happen’ (Rhees et al., *op. cit.*, p. 59).

⁶⁹ Thanks to António Caeiro, Philip Cartwright, Janet Szpakowski and Michael Szpakowski, for comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks also to the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT) for funding me while I worked on this paper.

